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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to describe the structure of the college-to-work transition for baccalaureate degree recipients and the mechanisms through which the transition occurs. Data were collected through interviews with recent graduates (N=30) and seniors (N=27) at a midwestern, comprehensive research university. Analysis indicated that employment was typically secured both through on-campus recruitment and direct personal contact and networking by specialized professional graduates. The framework developed identified three market sectors: specialized professional; broad professional; and general (liberal arts)--the general sector was substantially underemployed. Transition to work was found to have several stages, starting before graduation and continuing, sometimes, after graduation. (One-fourth of the graduates found the reversal in status to the bottom of the ladder a difficult transition.) The transition to work also involved several important life events: obtaining new responsibilities and accountability; leaving parents; developing relationships with significant others during transition; and generally moving into adulthood. The paper discusses several considerations and needs that should be addressed in the career planning and placement field so that college-to-work transitions are more successful and rewarding. Contains 25 references. (GLR)

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STRUCTURAL DISCONTINUITIES IN THE TRANSITION FROM COLLEGE TO WORK

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STRUCTURAL DISCONTINUITIES IN THE TRANSITION FROM COLLEGE TO WORK

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PURPOSE

For the past fifteen years, institutions of higher education have struggled to assist an oversupply of college graduates to enter a generally stagnant labor market (Gordon, 1974; Sargent, 1984). A number of individual and institutional factors have been identified that contribute to differences in occupational attainment (Astin, 1978; Bowman, 1987; Richards, 1984; Rumberger, 1981), and a variety of programs and activities to improve career preparation have been implemented (Johnson & Figler, 1984). Yet no one has examined in any detail the structure of the college to work transition, and the mechanisms by which individuals move from institutions to positions in the economic sector.

The purpose of the study was to describe the structure of the college to work transition for baccalaureate degree recipients and the mechanisms through which the transition occurs. The study draws upon the perspectives of more general studies of the school to work transition (Coleman, 1984), job and career transitions (Granovetter, 1974; Louis, 1980), life transitions (Namboodiri, 1987; Sokol & Louis, 1984), and the complexity of differentiated labor markets (Kalleberg & Berg, 1987).

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METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Because of the lack of research on the college to work transition and the complexity encountered in other transitions (Louis, 1980), an exploratory approach was adopted in developing a framework for the college to work transition. Data regarding the structure of the transition (structural level dimensions) were gathered through interviews (individual level sources) with recent graduates (N=30) and seniors (N=27) at a single midwestern, comprehensive research university. The sample sizes are considered adequate to describe in general terms the social structure of the college to work transition. (The samples are too small to draw definitive conclusions about individual behavior, although some tentative results are presented.) The research is also limited to a single institution whose context and structure may influence the results.[1] The general employment outcomes of the institution are quite consistent with national data, however (Sargent, 1984).

The research was conducted in two major phases utilizing qualitative methodologies (1. a sample of recent graduates; 2. a sample of seniors). The first phase consisted of interviews with 30 graduates, two-four years following their degree, who had pursued employment directly upon graduation. The methodology was constant comparison - grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which analytical categories are constructed to organize and explain the results of an initial round of data gathering. The categories are then validated and refined by additional rounds of samples whose characteristics are determined by the tentative explanations and requirements for verification developed in earlier stages (i.e., constant comparison). The first phase contained three rounds of interviews, pursued until reasonable stability of the analytical categories was established.

The first round (Spring, 1987) consisted of twelve recent graduates with whom one of the researchers had established contact through the fraternity-sorority system. The sample is best described as fortuitous and was dominated by business majors. This round of interviews established the basic outline of transition stages, the problem of exiting which was to become the focus of the second phase of the study, and the importance of networks.

A second round of interviews was conducted the following Fall with twelve recent graduates, including six from the first round, and six added to expand the proportion of majors to a more representative sample. Much of the second round interviewing was conducted in a group setting with initial responses written and then followed by discussion and expansion of responses. This round provided responses consistent with the first and provided more detailed information on problems encountered in employment. This stage also provided information on employer behavior, since graduates were now participating in the selection and hiring of new employees.

A third round of interviews (Spring, 1988) was designed to validate the categories established in the first two rounds. The former interviews had been conducted primarily with graduates drawn from the fraternity-sorority system. The third round was drawn from a sample of university graduates from the same era (3-4 years beyond graduation) interviewed by telephone. The sample was stratified to minimize Greek membership and to emphasize academic majors underrepresented in the first two rounds. One concern had been that networking was a more uniquely "greek" phenomenon. Similar results were obtained in the third round, however.

The first phase of the study provided reasonably stable results concerning problems encountered in employment and early career patterns. More detailed information was considered valuable regarding the problems of exiting the institution, and the transition often to unemployment and underemployment rather

than to employment. In addition, several areas, especially the humanities and social sciences, were underrepresented in the initial sample. The decision was made to conduct a second phase of the study that would follow seniors through their final semester and into the early months following graduation. A random sample of 27 university seniors was interviewed during the students' final (Spring 1989) semester, and up to six weeks following graduation (at which time over 90 percent had secured employment or made definite plans for the coming year). The seniors were interviewed briefly in the early part of the semester to establish tentative plans. They were then interviewed in some depth during the latter part of the semester, and in some cases again during graduation week when plans were somewhat indefinite in the initial interview. Those who had not found employment or made other plans were subsequently interviewed by telephone approximately ten weeks following graduation.

Data were gathered in each stage by one of two researchers and then analyzed separately by that person and a third researcher. Analyses were thus internally validated across data sources through three rounds of data gathering in the first phase, and through another random sample in the second phase. Likewise, analyses were internally verified by comparing the results obtained separately from two analyses of each interview. Representativeness of the results was also verified against university data for all recent graduates in areas such as type of major, and percentage of graduates securing jobs prior to graduation.

RESULTS

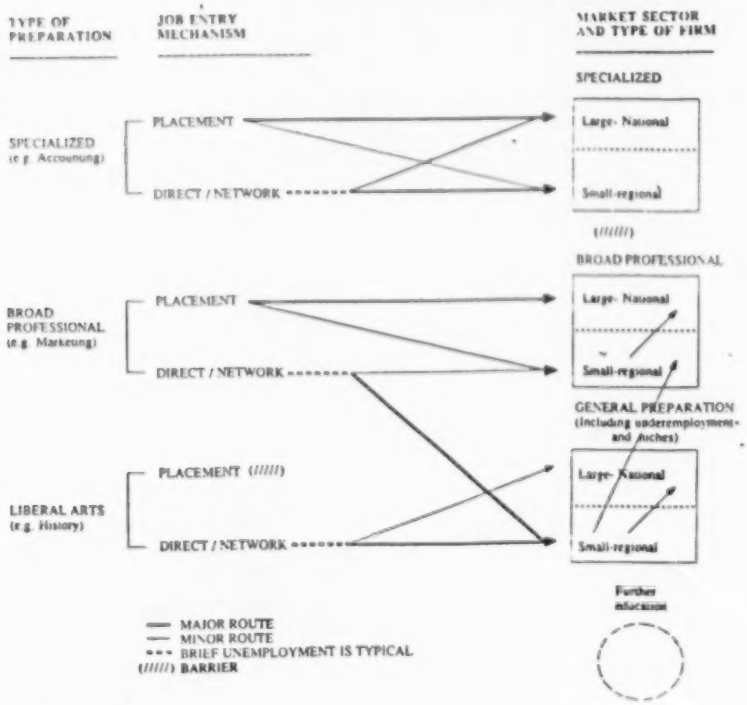
The Framework of Transition

The general structure of the college to work transition can be described in terms of a) differentiated job markets and transition patterns associated with type of academic preparation; b) stages, associated with transition tasks and transition patterns, but containing other important life events as well; and c)

other social influences associated primarily with personal and group relations.

The patterns and outcomes of transition (Figure 1) are heavily influenced by the features of differentiated labor market sectors associated with different types of occupations and accompanying academic preparation. We identify three major sectors, a) specialized professional, b) broad professional; and c) general preparation. A fourth sector which is somewhat comparable in many respects to employment is d) further education. The patterns of transition within these sectors may include immediate employment at the baccalaureate level, or some chronological combination of unemployment, underemployment in the general preparation sector and eventual transition to baccalaureate level employment, and further education.

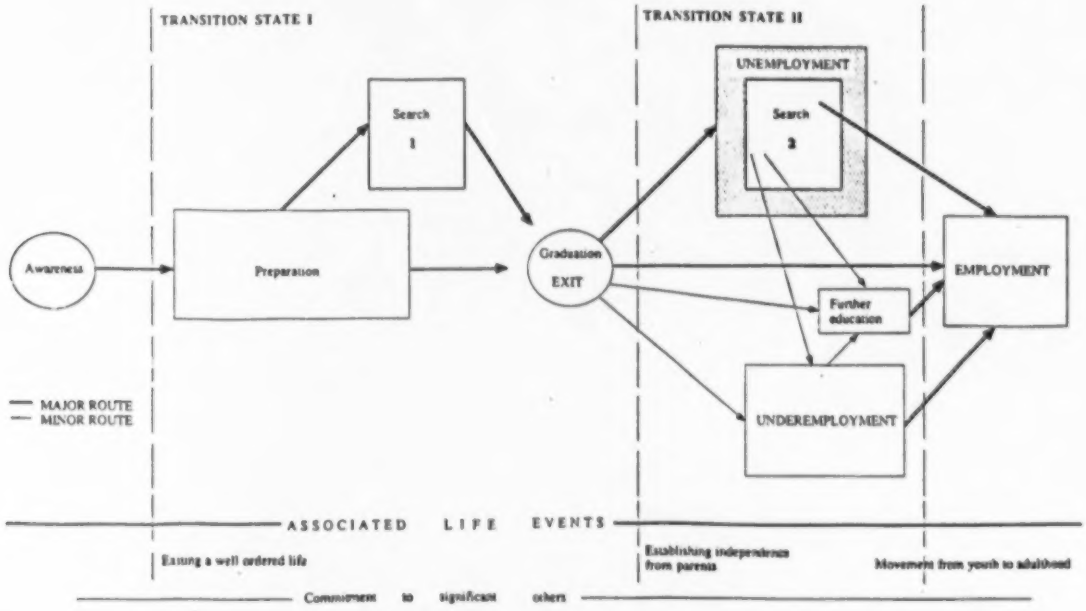
Figure 1
Market Sectors and Entry Mechanisms



The events of transition unfold within a framework (Figure 2) that is characterized by several stages, beginning with awareness and initial preparation

for the transition, continuing through job seeking prior to and often following graduation, and then, following the patterns of transition just described, to eventual employment for most graduates. Each stage can be defined by a somewhat differentiated social structure, imposed partially by the tasks associated with that stage and partially the events associated with the previous stage and perhaps with chance. Substantial discontinuities can be found between subsequent stages.

Figure 2
Stages in the College to Work Transition



The stages also contain for most individuals, significant life event transitions such as exiting a well ordered work and life situation, gaining major independence from parents, gaining a spouse and thus a different life situation, and beginning to establish a pattern of social relationships that will characterize much of adult life.[2] Influencing all this in turn is another set of factors concerned with relationships with peers, parents, significant others, faculty and staff, and with networks of individuals spanning job seekers,

employing organizations, specific occupations, and geographical areas. Individual characteristics such as choice of preparation, competence, motivation, and maturity obviously shape what occurs. The intention here is to describe the general framework within which individual transitions, shaped also by individual characteristics, take place.

Differentiated Market Sectors and General Patterns of Transition

The market for college graduates consists of several differentiated market sectors defined primarily by type of occupation and by the type of academic preparation required or preferred by employers.[3] Size of firm and geographic orientation were found to be additional factors which further differentiate employment within sectors. Larger corporations and those with a national orientation function in somewhat different (though overlapping) labor market sectors than smaller firms with a more typically regional-local orientation.

Specialized professional. The first sector is defined by a series of market segments consisting of undergraduate professions such as accounting, engineering, education, nursing, and pharmacy, and specialized fields such as chemistry, geology and computer science for which counterpart programs of specialized liberal arts preparation are available and clearly preferred by employers. Little movement is found into this sector, although a few graduates prepared in specialty areas took positions associated with more general forms of preparation. Supply and demand are more balanced in this sector because academic programs are somewhat able and inclined to limit enrollment. Positions and qualification are clearly defined and the market mechanism is essentially one of matching through sharing of information by employers and job seekers. Job search strategies and situational factors may influence the length of the search and the type of position secured, but not to the extent found in other sectors. Eventually, those with specialized academic preparation are matched

with available positions.

Broad professional. The second sector consists of more generally defined positions for which broad programs of professional preparation have been established and are usually preferred by employers. Positions and forms of preparation are less clearly defined than in the first sector. Other competencies such as interpersonal and organizational skills play a substantial role, but are not often credentialled through required internships as they are in Sector 1.

General business majors such as finance and marketing along with communications oriented preparation in journalism and advertising were the predominant forms of academic preparation in this area. Customer-client contact positions such as wholesale sales and manufacturer's representative, personal banker, and advertising sales and market research were typical entry level positions. Liberal arts majors with broader preparation seldom competed successfully for these positions initially. (Liberal arts graduates did enter this sector, however, after a year or so of "underemployment" in the third sector.) There was also an apparent oversupply of broad professional graduates and about one third were forced to accept underemployment in (the general preparation) sector three. (The situation was more favorable for the Spring, 1988 seniors in the second sample.)

The broad professional sector reflects the professionalization of business, and to some extent of media communications in the United States (Cheit, 1975; Locke, 1988). Large-national employers especially, clearly preferred business majors to liberal arts majors in our sample. Employers did not appear overly concerned with the specifics of preparation, but instead sought information regarding interpersonal and organizational skills and personal characteristics of applicants. Furthermore, liberal arts graduates moved to this sector without additional specialized preparation, after a year or so of underemployment. The most likely explantation is that majoring in the broader areas

of business is as much a sign of socialization to business as it is a reflection of desired specialized knowledge and competence.

General preparation. The third sector consists of positions for which employers express no major preference for a particular type of preparation or for which no defined program of preparation is typically found. In the current job market at least, this third sector consists largely of positions involving underemployment; i.e., tasks which do not reasonably suggest the attainment of a baccalaureate degree as a base of preparation. Employers prefer college graduates for these positions, as we infer from the ease with which graduates attain such positions. But graduates only displace those with lesser qualifications who would otherwise be selected. Some might argue that many of these positions are being educationally upgraded. Judging from job descriptions, salary levels, and the absence of career progression that would make such employment attractive to graduates, we conclude that most of the positions requiring only a baccalaureate and lacking other specific requirements constitute a third sector of the market for baccalaureate level graduates. Most of the positions secured by liberal arts graduates in our samples involved direct retail level customer-client contact such as retail sales or customer service representatives, and/or supervision of non-professional employees such as a telemarketing supervisors.

We have also placed, tentatively, in the general preparation sector a number of rather specialized positions for which organized programs of preparation are not typical. Two English majors did indeed find positions in the publishing industry. A general studies major with a certificate in Aging Studies continued in employment as the manager of a retirement residence. The handful of such specialized jobs secured in our samples constituted the only source of baccalaureate level employment in sector three. (A few liberal arts graduates did secure direct employment in sector two, however.)

Post-baccalaureate education. Although our focus was upon undergraduates

pursuing employment directly following the baccalaureate degree, it was evident that further education constituted a fourth sector of opportunity for graduates. Further education was the market for talent in our two samples; i.e., graduate and post-baccalaureate professional programs successfully recruited the most able undergraduates as judged by academic performance. It was also the "fall back" position for undergraduates who failed to secure baccalaureate level employment initially and thus functioned much like underemployment in several respects; i.e., graduates deserted post-baccalaureate education when they secured appropriate employment.

Size of market sectors. The samples were too small to draw conclusions about the size of each sector and the proportion of graduates in preparation. Our second, random, sample and university data generally suggest the proportion by type of preparation to be about one third in each sector. By initial employment, the percentages were about one third in each sector, allowing for about 15 percent who continue their education. Within three years following graduation, however, the percentage of graduates in the Broad Professional Sector (Two) increased to about 50 percent, and the proportion in the third sector decreased to about 20 percent. This reflects the movement out of the underemployment which characterizes most of sector three at present.

Segmentation and Mobility

Two additional features which define and differentiate the several market sectors are the degree of segmentation and the stability of early employment within each sector. The specialized sector is the most segmented. No one in either sample moved into it, and only one person moved from it (from education to marketing). In contrast, the broad professional and general prepartion sectors revealed considerable mobility. All of the broadly prepared professionals and liberal arts graduates who were originally underemployed in sector three,

moved to sector two (broadly professional) positions within three years of graduation (except two individuals who remained underemployed by their own choice).

Movement between sectors was associated with job stability within sectors. Graduates who secured baccalaureate level employment in the specialized or broad professional sectors were less likely to change jobs (median of 1.2 jobs in 3-4 years) than those whose first job was underemployment in the general preparation sector (median, 3 jobs). Typically, it took about a year for underemployed graduates to secure positions at the margins of baccalaureate level employment and often another job change to secure a position more like those taken initially by broadly prepared professionals.[4]

Size and Geographic Orientation of Firm

The job market for college graduates is differentiated primarily by type of occupation and accompanying degree of specialized preparation rather than by characteristics of employers such as type of industry. (Some industrial differentiation such as the absence of agricultural employment in the sample is obvious.) Size of firm and geographic focus of the firm did differentiate somewhat the market for graduates, however. Much of the growth and employment in the United States has occurred in small to medium size firms (Birch, 1979; Granovetter, 1984). Such firms are less likely to recruit nationally, or to pursue extensive on-campus recruitment if qualified personnel can be employed through other means. Graduates who secured baccalaureate level employment in business firms through means other than on-campus recruiting were likely to be employed in smaller firms and in firms such as banks that are local or regional in orientation. Employment was likely to be secured through contacts with persons in the firm or through direct application in response to advertisements. Movement from underemployment to baccalaureate level employment was likely to involve positions in smaller firms and within the same geographic area as the

initial employment.

Patterns of Transition and Initial Employment

The several market sectors for college graduates emphasize somewhat different mechanisms of securing employment and contain varying patterns of transition and early employment (Figure 1). We have utilized these mechanisms and patterns in turn to define the several market sectors and to suggest other characteristics of each.

The basic differentiation in job search mechanisms is between those associated with on-campus recruitment (placement) and those utilizing other methods such as personal contacts, direct application and responses to vacancy notices. About one-fourth of the graduates in each sample secured employment through on-campus recruitment. This included about one-third of each of the specialized and the broadly prepared professional graduates. None of the dozen liberal arts graduates in the two samples seeking employment, secured employment through on-campus recruitment.

The most successful alternative mechanism combined public information (newspaper ads, etc.) and personal contacts (networks) and was utilized by another third of the specialized graduates (the matching process). Responses to job vacancy notices and personal contacts apart from placement lead to immediate baccalaureate jobs for only one in ten among the broadly prepared professionals and liberal arts graduates, however.

Through on-campus and recruitment and a combination of public information and personal contacts, about half the graduates had secured employment by graduation or within a few weeks thereafter. The remainder faced a period of unemployment ranging from around a month for those who were willing to lower their expectations and accept underemployment to approximately three months (and at most six) for those who continued to seek baccalaureate level employment.

Within six months of graduation all of the recent graduates had either found employment at the baccalaureate level (about 60%), accepted less than baccalaureate level employment (about 1/3), or made the decision to seek further education (about 10%). The same general results and placement patterns were found in our more recent sample of seniors at the last point of contact two and one half months following graduation. Slightly more of the seniors found baccalaureate level employment and correspondently fewer were underemployed or unemployed. The random sample of seniors also included about one in ten pursuing post-baccalaureate education as their primary choice.

Acknowledging the limitations of sampling and methodology, a tentative explanation can be constructed of the differences in methods of job seeking and alternative outcomes. The explanation is based on differences in the several market sectors, type of academic preparation, and the role of information, and of screening and sponsorship (influence) in each sector.

The market for specialized professionals was earlier described as one of matching. Characteristics of positions and qualifications of graduates are more readily defined. Academic course work in fields such as accounting and engineering is related to job tasks, and required internships in fields such as education and nursing all provide information to potential employers.

Seven of the ten recent graduates with specialized preparation had secured employment within a month of graduation, three through placement and four through contacts in a particular geographic area and direct application. The remaining three returned to school; two, after a substantial period of unemployment. None accepted underemployment. The same pattern held for our more recent sample of seniors where all specialized majors had accepted employment or chosen to return to school within ten weeks of graduation.

The nature of employment mechanisms and the outcomes of job seeking are different and more complex in the broader markets for college graduates. In the

second sector associated with broad professional preparation, employers play a more active role in seeking information about candidates, and contacts within firms are important as sources of information screening, and endorsement. As with the specialized graduates, about one-third of those in broader professional programs secured employment through on-campus placement. In contrast to half (four of seven) the remaining specialists who then secured employment through geographic contacts and direct application, only about ten percent (1 of 9) broader professionals secured baccalaureate level employment following graduation. The remainder accepted underemployment.

The job search mechanisms and patterns of transition to employment for the broader liberal arts graduates were varied. The number of graduates in this category was quite small, and data from the two samples had to be combined to accomplish any analysis. (The small number in the first sample resulted from sampling procedures.) More importantly the random sample of seniors mirrored the sharp enrollment decline in the humanities and the social sciences found in national data and at the site university. A liberal arts education is also the primary route to many graduate and post-baccalaureate professional programs, and this was the case for about one-third of the liberal arts seniors. Thus, the supply of jobs relative to the small number of primarily humanities and social science graduates seeking those positions was favorable. Just over half (5 of 8) of the broadly prepared liberal arts graduates and seniors secured baccalaureate level positions as their first employment.

The employment situations for liberal arts graduates were diverse and reflected a combination of general preparation for which any degree might have been suitable, and some very specialized situations for which defined professional programs of preparation are not found. For example, a life science graduate with relevant part time work experience found employment in the design and development of prosthetic devices. Two English majors secured employment in the

publishing industry. The other positions represented more the customer/client contact positions taken by those with broad professional preparation.

None of the liberal arts graduates secured employment through on campus recruitment. About one third pursued employment in this manner and thus competed unsuccessfully with those of more professional preparation. Positions were secured generally after some period of unemployment and through direct application and geographic contacts in an urban area. Sponsorship and screening through contacts within firms did not appear to be a significant factor. The initial positions were almost all in smaller, and typically more local firms. One graduate abandoned the search and was accepted in a graduate program, and the others were initially underemployed (1) or unemployed (2).

Post-baccalaureate Education and Employment

Employment was by far the major path pursued by baccalaureate graduates. Other potential options would include the military, service opportunities such as the Peace Corps, marriage without concurrent employment, and further education. Post-baccalaureate education was the only other major path pursued by those in either sample and we came to perceive this as, in many respects, a fourth sector of the job market for graduates.

Further education was the primary goal for about one-third (3 of 10) of the liberal arts seniors, and for one of the specialized graduates. Moreover, it was the "fall-back" position for two-thirds of the seniors who had not secured employment by their final semester, and was the option pursued by about one in ten in both samples who were underemployed following graduation. This latter movement to further education meant that the number actually pursuing education beyond the baccalaureate as a fall-back position because of failure to secure employment begins to approach same as the number pursuing it as their primary

choice.[5] Further education was pursued in roughly equal proportions as graduate education and as professional education in fields such as law and medicine.

The employment nature of further education was demonstrated by the three individuals who pursued it (after failing to find employment) in the sample of recent graduates. None of the three completed an advanced degree, but instead accepted appropriate baccalaureate level employment during the course of their advanced studies; i.e., they remained in further education until they received a better offer. As one expressed it, "a teaching assistantship was the best offer I received." The findings fit the queue model of employment (Thurow, 1975) in which those lower in the line waiting for employment seek additional credentials to improve their chances.

Information and Influence: The Role of Networks

The data reported thus far suggest a market for college graduates consisting of market sectors differentiated by type of occupation and by accompanying preference or requirement for type of preparation. The sectors are further differentiated by size and orientation (national versus regional-local) of employers. Different occupations, and types of preparation, and different types of firms in turn rely on different types of information and sources of influence to link positions with applicants.

Information and influence were found to be transmitted through two somewhat overlapping means. The first was the rather straightforward and generally public transmission of job information through vacancy notices and, advertisements, and the information concerning applicants contained in trascripts, resumes, and to some extent letters of reference. Information may be somewhat subjective but its credibility is based upon institutional and program reputation, accreditation, and standardization of preparation in many cases. In contrast, the second mode of transmission for information and influence was through a diverse set of

networks in which information and influence is selectively transmitted. Indeed, the effectiveness of the network may depend upon the ability to restrict access to information.

Networks were used by employers as well as job seekers and served two functions of information transmission and screening-sponsorship (influence). To function effectively, networks inevitably overlap and interact, and indeed networks of networks can be identified. The types of networks identified include campus peers and former peers, within corporations, within occupations, and within geographic areas - with relatives and close personal friends a special type of geographic network.

Networking was a substantial factor in successful employment through on-campus recruiting for half the broadly prepared professionals, and in securing jobs other than through placement by about half the specialized professionals (and for almost all the liberal arts graduates who managed to find baccalaureate employment). Geographic networking also provided information leading to employment at less than the baccalaureate level, and to subsequent movement to baccalaureate level employment in the same geographic area for most of those initially underemployed.

Networks begin with current friends and acquaintances, and their friends and acquaintances, primarily within the institution but extending to home towns. Networks extend to employment through graduates employed in particular firms, occupations, and geographic areas - especially major metropolitan areas. Contacts within firms may be national in scope because of information and sharing throughout the firm, but contacts through recent graduates in particular occupations tend to be limited by geographic area (because of more limited contacts among young people in most occupations). Larger national employers use the contacts of recent graduates to generate and screen applicants and use additional networks of faculty and staff at the institution to pre-screen individu-

als to be recruited and interviewed on campus.

Networks into firms are used to provide and assess less standardized and more subjective information. Course work and non-standardized field experiences for broad professionals and liberal arts graduates apparently do not provide entirely appropriate information to employers. Employers thus actively engage in networking through their own employees and through on-campus contacts to gain information about recruits and applicants in such areas as interpersonal and organizational skills, motivation, and dependability. Employees can be held accountable for their recommendations, and as one person phrased it, "You obviously can't recommend the whole fraternity."

The ideal contact for job seekers appears to be a friend or acquaintance who graduated two or three years earlier and is established in a firm, but still close enough to those on campus and to the selection process to be used as a source of information and screening. According to recent graduates, identification and screening of candidates for employment can represent a substantial contribution to the firm. (At least one firm in the sample pays a direct bonus to employees for each new baccalaureate level employee successfully recruited.) Within our limited sample we found systematic ties through recent graduates between the university and four national corporations which used former graduates to recruit and screen candidates for employment. Within firm contacts of this type were linked to both on-campus recruitment and direct application, and were related almost entirely to baccalaureate level employment.

The networks found in more specialized professions, in smaller firms, and in less than baccalaureate level employment were most often geographic and provided information but little influence. Graduates in fields such as accounting and nursing who did not secure employment through placement generally moved to larger urban areas where they obtained baccalaureate level employment through newspaper advertisements and local contacts in firms and occupations. Local

contacts appeared to provide little influence over the decision to hire more specialized graduates, however.

Geographic contacts were the major source of job information for those forced eventually to seek less than baccalaureate level employment. Family and close family friends provided a special case of geographic networking. Unless such individuals were actually in the firm offering employment, their influence, as it was reported, was generally limited to less than baccalaureate employment. Geographic networks were also the major method by which those underemployed moved to baccalaureate level employment, typically in about a year, and in smaller firms within the same geographic area.

The Stages of Transition

Awareness and initial preparation. Differentiated market sectors and patterns of initial employment represent one major dimension of the college to work framework. The second dimension is one of stages (Figure 2). The transition experience unfolds typically in several stages in which decisions, situational factors and circumstances, and chance events at one stage influence decisions, events, and outcomes at subsequent stages.

Factors shaping the transition to work occur long before the transition commences. Combinations of choice and circumstance determine which institution is attended, which major is selected, how much time is devoted to various aspects of the college experience, and what credentials, contacts, and other resources relevant to work are acquired.

The transition to work begins with the awareness of transition tasks to be accomplished if an appropriate baccelaureate level position is to be gained. There is little structure to students becoming aware of the need to get started in securing employment. Most initiated their own activities after becoming aware of others taking such steps. Only about one student in ten connected

awareness with a university agency or individual. One theme found throughout the pre-graduation stage is the ambivalence within the institution toward promoting student attention to something other than current course work and activities.

Early awareness (more than seven months prior to graduation) and subsequent time for preparation and job search was a critical factor in securing baccalaureate level employment prior to graduation for both specialized and broadly prepared professionals in the sample of seniors. So few liberal arts graduates (one of eight seeking employment) secured employment prior to graduation that time of awareness and preparation was of little consequence. All the broad professional (4) and specialized majors (3) who initiated job search preparation more than seven months in advance of graduation secured baccalaureate level employment prior to graduation, compared with one of three broadly prepared majors and three of five specialized majors who initiated the process less than seven months in advance. On-campus recruitment is thus a special window of opportunity in the transition process for which early preparation is the key.

Early awareness was linked with planning for the final semester. Seniors securing employment prior to graduation were more likely to report taking light academic loads and spending less time on course work. Those initiating preparation later were more likely to describe a flurry of activities, including taking additional course work related to employment or to further education. Two seniors (of the 27) failed to satisfy graduation requirements and had to take additional course work in their final semester.

One major link between awareness and employment is that extensive on-campus recruitment begins about midway in the fall semester. About a third of those securing employment prior to graduation received the offer during the fall semester. Obviously, students who waited until the spring semester to initiate job seeking were omitted from a substantial portion of recruiting.

Personal relationships and personal resources. Coping with changes in personal relationships was a common theme in both samples and was pursued in the interviews with graduating seniors. Job search signals to others that the individual is preparing to leave and that personal relationships will inevitably be modified. Awareness then modifies relationships, generally through distancing prior to leaving. About three-fourths of the respondents in both samples reported greater attention to personal relationships during the period of transition. Most reported spending greater amounts of time with those also in transition, and distancing from and by those who would not graduate. Students with significant others devoted more time to the relationship, since graduation represents an important life event in that relationship.

Increased relationships among those also in transition reflected two substantial elements of the transition experience: the need for information and contacts through networking described earlier, and the need for emotional support in a difficult period. One problem that emerged was that seniors may rely on inappropriate judgments from supportive peers regarding desirable employment. About one out of five seniors (and a substantial proportion of those who actually secured employment prior to graduation) reported that rejecting the views of friends regarding desirable employment lead them to what they regarded later as a desirable position. (Entry positions in desirable career ladders may involve representing a corporation in a relatively remote area, or engaging in direct sales or direct client contact.)

The role of the university. The institution plays rather conflicting roles during the pre-graduation phase of transition. The university provides substantial career planning and placement resources to students from the day they enter through graduation. Approximately two-thirds of the recent graduates and seniors utilized university resources in their search for employment. About half use on-campus recruitment through the several placement offices, and about

one-fourth of the respondents in both samples secured employment in this manner. The university community also contains a sizeable array of individuals to whom students turn for individual counsel (mentoring) during the transition process.

On the other hand, there was little indication that alternatives to on-campus recruitment as a source of employment were being promoted, or that students were being prepared for the problems of unemployment and underemployment that awaited about half the graduates in both samples. Furthermore, most academic programs do not appear designed with the transition to work as a significant consideration. A few programs such as education and nursing anticipate the transition somewhat through required internship programs and early awareness by placement officers. Students in most programs, however, reported that preparing for transition involved modification of programs on their part through taking lighter loads or simply ignoring academic demands during the final semester.

Mentors. Approximately 80 percent of the recent graduates and seniors reported turning to a single individual on a recurring basis for counsel and support during the pre-graduation phase of the transition. No discernible consequences of such mentoring were found in our small samples. Early awareness and preparation for transition, use of other campus resources, subsequent time of employment, and problems encountered during the transition were uneffected by the presence or absence of a mentor.

Less than half of the mentors were in positions associated with career planning such as academic advisors and placement staff. (The exception was that almost all students preparing for post-baccalaureate education reported a close relationship with their academic or pre-professional advisor.) Slightly less than half were faculty. The others occupied a variety of positions such as residence hall advisor, student services staff, and athletic coach. Mentors were for the most part someone personally close to the student. They also appeared to be primarily individuals slightly older (less than ten years) than

the student. About one student in ten turned to someone outside the university such as a friend or relative.

The diversity of mentors, and the lack of identification with career planning for most, suggest the difficulties the university would face in attempting to improve the transition by working with those linked to the process by position.

Transition Stage Two: Post-Graduation

Employment, unemployment, and underemployment. The period immediately preceeding graduation focused upon search for appropriate employment, and for a small proportion of respondents (15%) gaining admission to further education. For about one-third of the recent graduates seeking employment, and for most of those pursuing further education, the goal was achieved and the transition took place as planned. For almost two-thirds, graduation was followed by an average of two months of unemployment and for about half of those (or one-third of all graduates), the next step was underemployment. (A very small percentage accepted underemployment almost immediately following graduation.) The more recent sample of seniors reported the same categories of transition, but on the whole fared much better with only one-fourth failing to find employment at the baccalaureate level within ten weeks of graduation. The remainder were split between unemployment and underemployment, with only one student switching to post-baccalaureate education.

As described earlier, the transition from unemployment to employment was strikingly different for those with specialized preparation versus those with broader professional preparation. Almost all of the specialized graduates who were initially unemployed, obtained baccalaureate level employment within approximately two months. The remaining few returned to school. In contrast, among those initially unemployed from broader professional fields such as

finance and journalism, all accepted less than baccalaureate level employment within three months. The small number of broad liberal arts graduates took a variety of paths; the majority finding baccalaureate level employment following a brief period of unemployment.

For over half the recent graduates the structure was not from college life to work, but from the relatively well structured life of an undergraduate to the absence of structure associated with unemployment.

Graduation has constituted traditionally a major life event, with the end of parental support and a definite shift to independence in all sectors of life. This was not the case for those graduates who faced unemployment. Approximately two-thirds (of those initially unemployed) remained dependent on parents for support. Most parents remained supportive while graduates searched for employment. But about one-third of those dependent on parents reported pressure to establish their independence, and a much smaller percentage felt unreasonably encouraged to prolong their dependence. The latter feelings were expressed primarily by students who had returned home following graduation. Relationships with parents were further complicated by graduate and parental expectations of greater independence associated with those who had recently become or planned to be married.

Graduation reflects many of the characteristics of involuntary termination. Graduates are in a sense forced from an organization, with no guarantee of future employment, and with most facing a period of unemployment featuring the loss of previously well organized structure and subsequent dependence upon others for support (Jahoda, 1982; Kauffman, 1982).

Post-baccalaureate education and contingency plans. Post-baccalaureate education was the only alternative to some form of employment chosen by any of the graduates in our two samples. Responses of the graduates choosing this alternative (about 15% across the two samples) were examined to study further

education directly and to analyze the nature of contingency plans when initial plans did not succeed.

Post-baccalaureate education successfully recruited the highest achieving undergraduates. This many explain the lack of a baccalaureate market for talent; i.e., recruiters seeking the most able undergraduates regardless of type of preparation. Post-baccalaureate education was also the path chosen by about one out of six respondents across the two samples who sought but failed to secure baccalaureate level employment by the time of graduation. Further education was apparently the "best offer" at the time. None of the three recent graduates who pursued this route completed their degree. Each secured employment at some point and abandoned their studies.

Further education was the preferred fall-back position (not necessarily their choice) for two-thirds of the senior sample during their final semester. Moving to a urban location with favorable employment conditions was considered by about one in five (of those then without employment), and the remainder had no plan at all. Opting for additional education appeared to represent a lack of alternatives rather than a positive choice. One-third of the recent graduates, reflecting later on their search for employment, commented on the lack of information about alternatives to on-campus recruitment as a job search strategy.

Other Sources of Discontinuity: Gender, Marriage, and Finances

The college to work transition has become a relatively unstable process. Additional considerations only complicate the process further. None of these leads to disastrous conseqences for the vast majority, but each provides a jolt on the road to transition. Two such factors, timing of preparation, and relationships with parents have been described already. Two additional factors, gender and marriage, and debts resulting from undergraduate education deserve mention. We found no direct effect of gender on the college to work transition.

(There were no minorities in either sample.) Marriage, and plans for marriage did affect the transition and early career patterns of about one-third of the females, however.

The most significant result regarding marriage is the absence of it, or even of significant relationships, among the sample of recent graduates. Among the graduates, all ages 25-27, only one-half of the women and about one in seven of the men were married. None of the others reported a truly significant relationship. (Marriage or a relationship leading to consideration of marriage was reported by approximately one-third each of males and females in our sample of seniors.)

Marriage or significant relationships did not appear to affect the career plans or transition of any of the men of the sample. Three-fourths of the recent graduate women and over half of the senior females in such relationships were affected however. One major reason for the disproportinate effect on females is that they tended to marry slightly older graduates who had made the transition to employment. The women then accepted being place-bound by the husband's position. In the two cases where the female graduated first, however, they each accepted less than baccalaureate level employment while waiting for their fiance to graduate. The outcome was that among the recent graduate females, marriage or marriage plans either delayed baccalaureate employment or resulted in an extra job change because the female was place-bound. In the sixteen examples of marriage or significant relationships across the the two samples, we found only two examples of mutual career adjustment by male and female, and ironically in one the engagement was later broken.

Marriage and marriage plans also complicated the relationships with parents when graduates did not immediately secure employment. The majority of recent graduates in such circumstances reported this leading to increased expectation of independence by parents that could not be met because of lack of employment.

The final substantive factor affecting the transition and early career patterns was debt accumulated from undergraduate education. About one student in six in our sample of recent graduates reported that repayment of undergraduate loans had a significant effect on their decision to accept a given job offer prior to graduation, or to accept underemployment rather than to continue a search for baccalaureate level employment following graduation.

The Transition to Baccalaureate Level Employment

Within three years of their degree, all except two of the thirty recent graduates had achieved baccalaureate level employment. (The two exceptions involved special considerations.) The transition was directly from college for about a third, and extended by a typically brief period of unemployment for around another third, and for further schooling for about one in ten. The transition was most extended for the remaining third who were initially underemployed, and achieved baccalaureate level employment typically in a year or more.

A reasonable period of underemployment for many is apparently necessary to demonstrate or credential the kind of non-academic competencies such as interpersonal skills and organizational effectiveness that employers are apparently seeking but not identifying sufficiently during pre-graduation recruitment. The median length of underemployment was one year. None of those underemployed following graduation moved to baccalaureate level employment in less than nine months. Within two years, all those who were unemployed following graduation (except two) had moved to baccalaureate level employment, the majority in smaller and more regionally oriented firms.

The Social Structure of Employment

Graduates encountered a work world situation substantially different from that of college according to nine of ten. For about two-thirds the most impact was in non-work life. "Lonely" was the term most often used to describe the

early period of full time employment. Full time employment marked the first substantial break from a life situation organized around a sizeable number of young adults, with substantial independence from yet continued financal and personal support from parents. Assuming full responsibility for all the practical necessities of life, developing new friends - with opportunities to meet people restricted by work and the need to disassociate work relationships from personal relationships, dating, and sexual relations in an era of risk were all factors cited by graduates. (These same non-work issues were similarly the concern about the future most often identified by the sample of seniors.) The centrality of loneliness and a new life away from family and an organized pattern of friends and social support reinforces our conclusion that the transition to work is as much a life transition as a career transition.

Differences between the structure of full-time employment and academic work were substantial, though less difficult to master according to the graduates. These differences have been examined in other studies and summarized by several authors such as Fox and Krausz (1982). The responses of the recent graduates are consistent with these earlier studies and are summarized briefly. (About three-fourths of the graduates commented on various of aspects of the differences between full-time employment and working in an academic setting.) Work occurs in a more brief time frame, at a faster pace, and with less variety and more focus than academic tasks. The individual has far less control over work tasks and arrangements. ("There's no equivalent to dropping a course.") There is generally a single supervising authority, rather than several faculty with authority dispersed; a small group of colleagues with whom there is continuous association; and the relationships with both supervisor and colleagues are collaborative. ("You can affect your supervisor's and colleagues' chances of promotion.") Work relationships as well as the dispersion of non-work life lead to the cultivation of social relationships generally apart from work.

The transition to work also includes a status reversal to the bottom of the ladder, which about one-fourth of the graduates found difficult. (Interestingly, all of those affected were individuals who had achieved baccalaureate level employment directly. Those who were initially unemployed were apparently pleased just to have a job at the outset.)

DISCUSSION

The intention of the research was to develop a framework that would explain the nature of the college to work transition for baccalaureate degree recipients. Utilizing interview data from small samples of recent graduates (N=30) and seniors in their final semester (N=27), a reasonably coherent framework was developed.

The framework contains differentiated market sectors associated with specialized professional, broad professional, and general (liberal arts) forms of academic preparation. The general preparation sector is characterized at present by substantial underemployment. The market sectors are further differentiated by the approaches to employment and employee selection taken by larger, nationally oriented, versus smaller, typically regional firms. Post-baccalaureate education represents a fourth sector which functions as a direct market for talent, as well as a potential alternative to immediate employment.

Employment is typically secured through both on-campus recruitment, and direct personal contact and networking by specialized and broadly prepared professional graduates, but almost entirely through direct contact and networking in the general preparation sector. Networking in the broad professional and general preparation sectors reflects the less standardized types of preparation and positions in these sectors, as well as the importance of competencies not often credentialed through academic performance. Networking may transmit influence, through screening and sponsorship, as well as information, and is utilized

by employers as well as job seekers. Networking for job seekers typically begins with peers, but may involve networks within firms, within occupations (typically limited), and within urban geographic areas.

The transition to work occurs in several stages, beginning prior to graduation with initial awareness of transition tasks and preparation for job search. On-campus recruitment prior to graduation represents a window of opportunity for specialized and broad professional graduates, for which early preparation is critical. Liberal arts graduates do not compete well, and the general preparation market does not typically recruit directly on-campus.

Graduation is followed by immediate employment, or by entry into a second transition stage characterized by relatively brief unemployment, and for some a more extended period of underemployment in positions of general preparation. Underemployment leads eventually to baccalaureate level employment for almost all graduates. Further education occurs as an initial choice, especially for high academic achievers, and as a fall-back alternative for others.

The period of transition to work is associated with several important life events. For many, graduation is the first exit from an educational institution, with its reasonably well organized life for participants, to full-time employment where most of the responsibilities for work and non-work life fall to the individual. Likewise, for many this is first period of substantial independence from parents, or for those unemployed, a return to dependence. Relationships with significant others may reach important choice points, and may substantially affect transition and early career patterns. In general, the transition from college to work represents the early stages of a more general transition from youth to adulthood.

The framework is reasonably consistent with the behavior of graduates and seniors in our two small samples. Cross-validation is of course an issue, especially to other types of institutions whose structural influences may have

been obscured in a single institution study. Of more importance is the need to validate the structure by obtaining data on the transition behavior of larger samples of undergraduates. This is now being pursued in the same institution, but multi-institution studies are needed.

Larger samples and additional institutions are also needed to pursue other issues relevant to the question of structure. So few non-traditional students and those already employed were found in the samples that potential differences in transition structures and mechanisms could not be addressed. Likewise, the type of institution, midwestern and smaller urban setting preclude substantial claims about how the framework might generalize to other settings.

The results suggest some potential lines of investigation not addressed currently by the career planning and placement field. Educational institutions are engaged in out-placement as well as placement; i.e., how to exit those terminated without disrupting their work or the efforts of those who remain. The concept of involuntary termination without any guarantee of future employment also leads to greater consideration of unemployment (Jahoda, 1982) and underemployment (Kauffman, 1982) as important components of the college to work transition for many graduates. Finally, what has been portrayed largerly as a career transition can linked with several fundamental life event transitions. This suggests the need for rethinking elements of career planning and placement. Life events are more accurately portrayed as somewhat intense personal transitions in contrast to the more rational, information based portrayals of career transition (Sokol & Louis, 1984). College graduates may not "flounder" as much as younger high school leavers (Namboodiri, 1987) in the transition to work, but the interaction between vocational and other dimensions of life is clear.

Although transition from college to work may be bumpy, the outcomes of the process are generally positive and reasonable. John Holland (1974) has argued that most individuals chose careers and enter the work world without the need

for substantial assistance. He contends that perhaps fifteen percent would benefit from more systematic guidance and that five percent may have major personal problems that require assistance. The remainder benefit primarily from information about the world of work and about themselves as potential workers. Our limited samples support this view in terms of proportion and severity of likely problems. Hopefully, the information provided may assist individuals and institutions to identify the transition bumps and potholes, as well as the opportunities for most graduates.

Footnotes

[1]The institution is public, but not land grant, located in a small midwestern metropolitian area, at leaset 200 miles from several major metropolitan areas. The institution enrolls substantial numbers of out-of-state students from one or more of these areas. The state economy is mixed, and heavily related to agriculture. The economy cannot absorb all the graduates of higher education and out-migration is typical.

[2]The concept of college to work as a dimension of the broader transition from youth to adulthood emerges from the study, but has not been developed in any detail.

[3]Assignment of occupations and related forms of academic preparation to sectors was somewhat arbitrary. The core components of each area appear reasonable, but fields and occupations at the margins might well be reassigned in further studies. Should economics, for example, be considered a broad liberal arts field, or a broad professional major? We assigned it to the latter, primarily because economics majors seek and secure positions more like professional graduates than like liberal arts majors. Computer science, assigned to specialized professional, and individual designed programs, assigned to broad liberal arts, were other problematic choices.

[4]Job changing may also be more frequent among smaller firms which may lack attractive career ladders.

[5]An estimate, like a number of others, correcting the first sample for underrepresentation from the liberal arts.

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